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Moslem clan may hold 7 U.S. hostages

By Bill Gertz
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U.S. officials have not ruled out the possibility that seven Americans held hostage in Lebanon are under the control of a Shi'ite fundamentalist clan.

Recent reports indicate that U.S. intelligence and Lebanese officials believe a Lebanese clan named Musawi is holding the Americans and is demanding the release of a clan member held in a Kuwait prison.

A Kuwait embassy spokesman said last week that one of 17 men convicted of the 1983 bombing of the U.S. and French embassies in Kuwait was named Musawi, but could not confirm if the man was related to the Lebanese clan of the same name.

"We have one member of the Musawi family, but we're not sure the Musawi family is holding the Americans in Lebanon," said the embassy spokesman, who would not give his name.

The Kuwait government last month reportedly ruled out an exchange of the 17 prisoners for the seven Americans after Islamic Jihad hijacked a Kuwaiti airliner last December. Two U.S. officials were killed during the hijacking. Terrorists, initially identified as members of Islamic Jihad, in May unsuccessfully attempted to assassinate Kuwait's ruler Shiek Jabir Ahmed Sabah.

A State Department official, speaking on background, was reluctant to provide details about the hostage situation while negotiations are in progress. But the official said the United States did not have any direct information that a specific request had been made linking the release of one or more the 17 prisoners held in Kuwait with the release of the Americans in Lebanon.

The official would only say that there have been reports "those holding the Americans are demanding the release of those held in Kuwait," the official said.

The official said the State Department is "talking with everyone" in the region in an effort to gain the release of the seven hostages. Officials are in the process of consulting with key figures in Lebanon, including government and militia faction representatives.

It also has been reported that U.S. officials have been working through Syrian President Hafez Assad to resolve the issue.

On Wednesday, relatives of four missing Americans met with National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane at the White House. Mr. McFarlane told the group the administration was seeking the release of the Americans but that the United States would not negotiate with terrorists.

The seven Americans were kidnapped in Lebanon in separate incidents over the last 16 months.

The missing Americans are: The Rev.

Martin Jenco, head of Catholic Relief Services in Lebanon, William Buckley, political officer at the U.S. embassy in Beirut; the Rev. Benjamin Weir, Presbyterian minister; Peter Kilburn, head librarian at the American University in Beirut; David Jacobsen, director of the American University hospital; Thomas Sutherland, American University's dean of agriculture; and Terry Anderson, Associated Press reporter.

Besides the Americans, there are four Frenchmen, a Briton and an Iranian missing.

State Department and White House spokesmen have said that the United States "will not make concessions to terrorists and will not ask others governments to do so," although they have repeatedly said the United States will "talk with anyone."

With regard to the seven American hostages, the State Department official admitted "there are limits to what we can do — it's very different from the TWA hijacking."

The official said the United States believes the extremist group Islamic Jihad has control of the Americans since the group claimed responsibility for the kidnappings.

Hussein Musawi, a radical Shi'ite leader, in wire service reports was quoted as believing that the seven Americans may be held in Baalbek, Beirut or Sidon. He said that his group,

Islamic Amal, is "not responsible for their abduction."

"I think the [Islamic] believers, the revolutionary mujahideen [fighters] might be responsible and the Americans might be held by them," Mr. Musawi, a former schoolteacher, said.

However, there have been some reports that one of the hostages, Buckley, the U.S. Embassy political officer, was moved out of Lebanon, first to Syria and finally Iran.

Baalbek is regarded as a center for Shi'ite fundamentalists tied to Iran. In addition to Mr. Musawi's Islamic Amal group, Hezbollah, or Party of God, has made Baalbek its power base. The relationship among Islamic Amal, Hezbollah and the terrorist group Islamic Jihad has not been established.

Two years ago U.S. and Israeli officials charged that Mr. Musawi was involved in the truck bombing of the U.S. and French troops in Beirut. After the attack French jets attacked Baalbek in retaliation.

Israeli jets attacked Baalbek last week.

An aide to Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., and an expert on Middle East affairs said that in the 18th century a large group of the original Musawi clan migrated from Iran, then Persia, to Lebanon. Originally, the family name Musawi was used by Moslems as a title designating individuals whose parents were descendants of Imam Ali, a Moslem prophet.